

The Separation Option: An Alternative to the Peace Process?

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Brief Analysis

Recently, public opinion in both Israel and the Palestinian territories has shifted in ways that argue for separation or disengagement. Israelis no longer accept the notion that negotiations will eventually lead to peace, but they are far more willing to make concessions to the Palestinians. Palestinians no longer expect a final agreement with Israel, and have instead shifted toward the Lebanon model of using violence to force an Israeli retreat – a trend with tragic implications for the future of Palestinian society.

Indeed, complete separation between Israel and a Palestinian state is inevitable because of the failure of all other strategies to end the current conflict. Even if there could be negotiations with the Palestinians based on mutual trust, the end result would still have to be complete separation. The only issue is whether to implement the strategy deliberately over time in a way that maximizes the benefits and minimizes the costs, or to hastily implement it under the duress of Israeli and Palestinian public opinion.

The Essence of the New Strategy Having been intimately engaged with each other for thirty-three years, Israeli and Palestinian societies now need to establish themselves as two independent political entities, since they cannot live together peacefully. Conceptually, the separation or disengagement strategy would involve:

- **Physical boundaries.** Boundaries that clearly define Israel and the Palestinian state as two separate entities would be established. Israel would then build an infrastructure that physically divides them. People could travel with passports and visas through border gates, as they would travel between any other sovereign states. This would apply in Jerusalem as well as in other areas: there would have to be a physical barrier dividing the Jewish and Arab areas of Jerusalem.
- **The labor force.** The litmus test for a separation strategy is the gradual reduction of Palestinian workers within Israel. The limited number of Palestinians who would be allowed to continue to work in Israel would have to hold valid passports and visas.
- **Economic cooperation.** Contrary to conventional wisdom, economic cooperation between the two states should be kept to a minimum so as to avoid a worsening of the Israeli-Palestinian political conflict. In most cooperative ventures, Arabs provide the cheap labor and Jews bring financing, technology, and marketing. The economic result is that ninety-five cents of every dollar stays in Israel, which makes Palestinians feel like they do the work while Israelis make the profits. It also creates a deep class conflict on top of an already-existing national conflict which further undermines any hope of neighborly relations in the future.

In order to achieve disengagement, Israel should proceed unilaterally, beginning with the easiest steps and then moving on to the more difficult measures. Israel should begin to construct a physical barrier in those areas where the border is easiest to define, and could then continue the barrier in those areas where Israel will annex very small portions of the West Bank to incorporate the majority of Israeli settlers. In addition, Israel would retain a military presence in the Jordan Valley until there was an agreement on demilitarization of the West Bank, in order to prevent

an "eastern bloc" of Arab states from using the region as a base for attacks on Israel.

Disengagement has far reaching support across the political spectrum in Israel, though it faces opposition from those – most prominently, Shimon Peres – who believe there can be cooperation in the Middle East. Recent polls show more than three-quarters of Israelis support total separation. Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who supports the plan, is, however, under pressure from the Palestinians and the United States not to proceed.

Reasons for Israel to Disengage There are four reasons for Israel to employ a disengagement strategy:

1. Israel would be freed of certain moral responsibilities. Palestinian society is facing very serious political and economic difficulties that have worsened since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. Positive change is unlikely. If these difficulties continue, both the international community and the United States may hold Israel responsible for the ails plaguing Palestinian society. Once there is disengagement, however, the moral responsibility for these problems would no longer be on Israel.

2. Open borders between Israel and Palestine would prompt the "creeping return" of Palestinians to Israel. This would cause a very dangerous shift in the Israeli political balance – the Labor party would become increasingly dependent on the Arab state and the Likud would almost automatically become more dependent on the ultra-orthodox. The result is that a) the two elements in Israel that are anti-Zionist or non-Zionist would be strengthened, and b) the two elements who are not producers of wealth, but consumers of welfare, would become considerably larger. Thus, the number of Israelis who work to make Israel a modern state, capable of defending itself, would shrink.

3. Palestinian-associated crime is a major concern in Israel. Since the Al-Aqsa Intifada and the closure of border crossings, crime has dropped forty percent even without a physical barrier. A physical barrier decreases such activity because people can no longer escape over the border into immunity.

4. Some Palestinians have vowed to wreak havoc on the Israelis and they have been very successful in taking advantage of Israel's openness to undermine it from within. An independent Palestinian state with open borders along heavily-populated Israeli areas creates the potential for highly increased terrorist activity – a potential that would be greatly lessened by a physical barrier.

Criticisms of Disengagement Some claim the disengagement strategy is not practical: the required infrastructure is too expensive and the removal of the settlements required for such a plan is not feasible. In fact, the cost of the plan would be offset by savings: the reduction of car theft alone, which now accounts for \$200 million a year, would cover the costs of the physical barrier. As for the settlers whose settlements would be left outside of the areas Israel annexes, the vast majority would leave voluntarily once they see Israeli public opinion delegitimizing their presence.

Some object to the partitioning of Jerusalem, which would be necessary for disengagement. Current Israeli public opinion strongly opposes the partition of the city in principle. On a practical level, however, Israelis do not want to retain control over the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem – they do not wish to have another 200,000 Palestinians living in their midst.

Some argue that a Palestine left to its own devices would be a hungry neighbor and therefore eventually a radical neighbor. In fact, the experience of the rest of the Middle East shows there is not necessarily a connection between economic hardship and radicalism; after all, some of the region's most radical states are the wealthiest, such as Libya. Israel has operated on the assumption that it should help the Palestinians, and this strategy has boomeranged against Israel.

Others object to disengagement on the grounds that the Palestinians will strongly oppose this strategy. That is true, but the Palestinians oppose disengagement precisely because they want to fight the existence of an Israeli state from

within its borders. Therefore, it would be essentially suicidal for Israelis not to implement a policy that would work to stymie these efforts.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Julia Voelker.

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